

DVD REVIEW

Poetry in Motion: 100 Years of Zanzibar's Nadi Ikhwan Safaa. Directed by Ron Mulvihill. Produced by Kelly Askew and Werner Graebner. DVD. 2016. Distributed by Jahazi Media/Gris-Gris Films. Subtitles in Arabic, English, French, Swahili. 71 minutes. Available at www.poetryinmotionfilm.com.

The beautiful film *Poetry in Motion: 100 Years of Zanzibar's Nadi Ikhwan Safaa* is about Nadi Ikhwan Safaa club, a *taarab* organization that in 2005 celebrated its hundredth anniversary, thus qualifying it as one of the oldest continuing performing orchestras in the world. *Taarab* is a form of Swahili poetry accompanied by orchestral music, having influences from the Indian sub-continent, the African mainland, and the Middle East, popular along the East African coast from Somalia to southern Africa. Translated roughly as “True Brotherhood Club,” it was also known, among band members and colloquially, as “*Ndugu Wanaopendana*,” or “Brothers Who Love Each Other.” Following the Socialist Revolution in 1964, music clubs were required to associate the names of their neighborhoods with the names of their bands. Thus Nadi Ikhwan Safaa also became known as “Malindi.”

Thankfully, the filmmakers avoided the long-passé “voice of God” narration style still unsettlingly common in so many contemporary ethnomusicology and anthropology/music films, opting instead for sparse intertitles to convey meta-contextual information when needed. In the opening sequence, the camera meanders gently through the narrow streets of Zanzibar Stone Town at night, on the way to the band’s clubhouse in Kokoni neighborhood. We immediately find the group in rehearsal, and the filmmakers introduce a highly effective editing technique that they return to throughout in this film – the intercutting of rehearsal footage with live performance footage using the same song as a place marker. Interviews with the musicians and composers provide miniature oral histories about their musical lives and careers with this group throughout the film, and the narrative is interspersed with archival photographs of the group. There is also rare footage of the group from what looks to be the late 1970s /early 1980s, recorded by Zanzibar Television.

The film is built around several topical vignettes, the most poignant of which is a discussion about when women were first allowed to join the group in the early 1960s. As times changed, the group saw the need to recruit women, and Nihifadhi Abdulla, interviewed here, became the first female to join the group. She relates how she sang a duet with singer-composer Mohamed Ahmed, who, as it turns out, was engaged to be married to another woman. Because the song embodied such an intense emotive dialog between two young lovers, the fiancé, upon witnessing this song’s live performance as it was enacted between Nihifadhi Abdulla and Mohamed Ahmed, broke off the engagement with Ahmed, who then eventually married his singing partner Nihifadhi. After their marriage, Nihifadhi was convinced by her husband, and her friends and family, to stop singing and “be a good wife.” They were eventually divorced, at which point Nihifadhi returned to the stage. One could not make this story up! This story is

told through dramatic intercut interview segments with both parties, now, of course, much older. Another vignette, also concerned with changing times, portrays an affiliated group, Spice Modern Taarab, who eschew the classic orchestral model for an ensemble featuring electric keyboards and guitars.

Poetry in Motion: 100 Years of Zanzibar's Nadi Ikhwan Safaa is a sensitive and compelling model for how to make an ethnographic film about music. Director Ron Mulvihill and co-producer / film editor Kelly Askew (Professor of Anthropology at University of Michigan Ann Arbor) have been working together on various film and music-related projects in East Africa for many years. Add the insights of co-producer Werner Graebner, also a scholar of East African music and a successful music promoter and distributor, and it becomes no surprise that this “dream team” was able to ask the right questions, point the camera in all of the right places (no small feat where staged music performance is concerned), and lovingly edit such a beautiful film. Most important is that a timely document has been created, in tribute to this remarkable *taraab* orchestra. *Taarab* instrumentalist Jawad Ibrahim Ahmed sums it up best when he proclaims at the end of the film, “Our descendants will see what we did for the centennial celebration.”

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